

The God Delusion

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Chapter 1: A Deeply Religious Non-Believer

DESERVED RESPECT

The boy lay prone in the grass, his chin resting on his hands. He suddenly found himself overwhelmed by a heightened awareness of the tangled stems and roots, a forest in microcosm, a transfigured world of ants and beetles and even - though he wouldn't have known the details at the time - of soil bacteria by the billions, silently and invisibly shoring up the economy of the micro-world. Suddenly the micro-forest of the turf seemed to swell and become one with the universe, and with the rapt mind of the boy contemplating it. He interpreted the experience in religious terms and it led him eventually to the priesthood. He was ordained an Anglican priest and became a chaplain at my school, a teacher of whom I was fond. It is thanks to decent liberal clergymen like him that nobody could ever claim that I had religion forced down my throat.

In another time and place, that boy could have been me under the stars, dazzled by Orion, Cassiopeia and Ursa Major, tearful with the unheard music of the Milky Way, heady with the night scents of frangipani and trumpet flowers in an African garden. Why the same emotion should have led my chaplain in one direction and me in the other is not an easy question to answer. A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief. In his boyhood at least, my chaplain was presumably not aware (nor was I) of the closing lines of *The Origin of Species* - the famous 'entangled bank' passage, 'with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and

with worms crawling through the damp earth'. Had he been, he would certainly have identified with it and, instead of the priesthood, might have been led to Darwin's view that all was 'produced by laws acting around us':

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Carl Sagan, in *Pale Blue Dot*, wrote:

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.' A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.

All Sagan's books touch the nerve-endings of transcendent wonder that religion monopolized in past centuries. My own books have the same aspiration. Consequently I hear myself often described as a deeply religious man. An American student wrote to me that she had asked her professor whether he had a view about me. 'Sure,' he replied. 'He's positive science is incompatible with religion, but he waxes ecstatic about nature and the universe. To me, that is religion!' But is 'religion' the right word? I don't think so. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist (and atheist) Steven Weinberg made the point as

well as anybody, in *Dreams of a Final Theory*:

Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that 'God is the ultimate' or 'God is our better nature' or 'God is the universe.' Of course, like any other word, the word 'God' can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that 'God is energy,' then you can find God in a lump of coal.

Weinberg is surely right that, if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'.

Much unfortunate confusion is caused by failure to distinguish what can be called Einsteinian religion from supernatural religion. Einstein sometimes invoked the name of God (and he is not the only atheistic scientist to do so), inviting misunderstanding by supernaturalists eager to misunderstand and claim so illustrious a thinker as their own. The dramatic (or was it mischievous?) ending of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, 'For then we should know the mind of God', is notoriously misconstrued. It has led people to believe, mistakenly of course, that Hawking is a religious man. The cell biologist Ursula Goodenough, in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, sounds more religious than Hawking or Einstein. She loves churches, mosques and temples, and numerous passages in her book fairly beg to be taken out of context and used as ammunition for supernatural religion. She goes so far as to call herself a 'Religious Naturalist'. Yet a careful reading of her book shows that she is really as staunch an atheist as I am.

'Naturalist' is an ambiguous word. For me it conjures my childhood hero, Hugh Lofting's Doctor Dolittle (who, by the way, had more than a touch of the 'philosopher' naturalist of HMS Beagle about him). In

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, naturalist meant what it still means for most of us today: a student of the natural world.

Naturalists in this sense, from Gilbert White on, have often been clergymen. Darwin himself was destined for the Church as a young man, hoping that the leisurely life of a country parson would enable him to pursue his passion for beetles. But philosophers use 'naturalist' in a very different sense, as the opposite of supernaturalist. Julian Baggini explains in *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* the meaning of an atheist's commitment to naturalism: 'What most atheists do believe is that although there is only one kind of stuff in the universe and it is physical, out of this stuff come minds, beauty, emotions, moral values - in short the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life.'

Human thoughts and emotions emerge from exceedingly complex interconnections of physical entities within the brain. An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles - except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural. As ever when we unweave a rainbow, it will not become less wonderful.

Great scientists of our time who sound religious usually turn out not to be so when you examine their beliefs more deeply. This is certainly true of Einstein and Hawking. The present Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society, Martin Rees, told me that he goes to church as an 'unbelieving Anglican ... out of loyalty to the tribe'. He has no theistic beliefs, but shares the poetic naturalism that the cosmos provokes in the other scientists I have mentioned. In the course of a recently televised conversation, I challenged my friend

the obstetrician Robert Winston, a respected pillar of British Jewry, to admit that his Judaism was of exactly this character and that he didn't really believe in anything supernatural. He came close to admitting it but shied at the last fence (to be fair, he was supposed to be interviewing me, not the other way around). When I pressed him, he said he found that Judaism provided a good discipline to help him structure his life and lead a good one. Perhaps it does; but that, of course, has not the smallest bearing on the truth value of any of its supernatural claims. There are many intellectual atheists who proudly call themselves Jews and observe Jewish rites, perhaps out of loyalty to an ancient tradition or to murdered relatives, but also because of a confused and confusing willingness to label as 'religion' the pantheistic reverence which many of us share with its most distinguished exponent, Albert Einstein. They may not believe but, to borrow Dan Dennett's phrase, they 'believe in belief'.

One of Einstein's most eagerly quoted remarks is 'Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.' But Einstein also said,

It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

Does it seem that Einstein contradicted himself? That his words can be cherry-picked for quotes to support both sides of an argument? No. By 'religion' Einstein meant something entirely different from what is conventionally meant. As I continue to clarify the distinction between supernatural religion on the one hand and Einsteinian religion on the other, bear in mind that I am calling only supernatural gods delusional.

Here are some more quotations from Einstein, to give a flavour of Einsteinian religion.

I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. This is a somewhat new kind of religion.

I have never imputed to Nature a purpose or a goal, or anything that could be understood as anthropomorphic. What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.

The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naive.

In greater numbers since his death, religious apologists understandably try to claim Einstein as one of their own. Some of his religious contemporaries saw him very differently. In 1940 Einstein wrote a famous paper justifying his statement 'I do not believe in a personal God.' This and similar statements provoked a storm of letters from the religiously orthodox, many of them alluding to Einstein's Jewish origins. The extracts that follow are taken from Max Jammer's book *Einstein and Religion* (which is also my main source of quotations from Einstein himself on religious matters). The Roman Catholic Bishop of Kansas City said: 'It is sad to see a man, who comes from the race of the Old Testament and its teaching, deny the great tradition of that race.' Other Catholic clergymen chimed in: 'There is no other God but a personal God ... Einstein does not know what he is talking about. He is all wrong. Some men think that because they have achieved a high degree of learning in some field, they are qualified to express opinions in all.' The notion that religion is a proper field, in which one might claim expertise, is one that should not go unquestioned. That clergyman presumably would not have

deferred to the expertise of a claimed 'fairyologist' on the exact shape and colour of fairy wings. Both he and the bishop thought that Einstein, being theologically untrained, had misunderstood the nature of God. On the contrary, Einstein understood very well exactly what he was denying.

An American Roman Catholic lawyer, working on behalf of an ecumenical coalition, wrote to Einstein:

We deeply regret that you made your statement ... in which you ridicule the idea of a personal God. In the past ten years nothing has been so calculated to make people think that Hitler had some reason to expel the Jews from Germany as your statement. Conceding your right to free speech, I still say that your statement constitutes you as one of the greatest sources of discord in America.

A New York rabbi said: 'Einstein is unquestionably a great scientist, but his religious views are diametrically opposed to Judaism.'

'But'? 'But'? Why not 'and'?

The president of a historical society in New Jersey wrote a letter that so damningly exposes the weakness of the religious mind, it is worth reading twice:

We respect your learning, Dr Einstein; but there is one thing you do not seem to have learned: that God is a spirit and cannot be found through the telescope or microscope, no more than human thought or emotion can be found by analyzing the brain. As everyone knows, religion is based on Faith, not knowledge. Every thinking person, perhaps, is assailed at times with religious doubt. My own faith has wavered many a time. But I never told anyone of my spiritual aberrations for two reasons: (1) I feared that I might, by mere suggestion, disturb and damage the life and hopes of some fellow

being; (2) because I agree with the writer who said, 'There is a mean streak in anyone who will destroy another's faith.' ... I hope, Dr Einstein, that you were misquoted and that you will yet say something more pleasing to the vast number of the American people who delight to do you honor.

What a devastatingly revealing letter! Every sentence drips with intellectual and moral cowardice.

Less abject but more shocking was the letter from the Founder of the Calvary Tabernacle Association in Oklahoma:

Professor Einstein, I believe that every Christian in America will answer you, 'We will not give up our belief in our God and his son Jesus Christ, but we invite you, if you do not believe in the God of the people of this nation, to go back where you came from.' I have done everything in my power to be a blessing to Israel, and then you come along and with one statement from your blasphemous tongue, do more to hurt the cause of your people than all the efforts of the Christians who love Israel can do to stamp out anti-Semitism in our land. Professor Einstein, every Christian in America will immediately reply to you, 'Take your crazy, fallacious theory of evolution and go back to Germany where you came from, or stop trying to break down the faith of a people who gave you a welcome when you were forced to flee your native land.'

The one thing all his theistic critics got right was that Einstein was not one of them. He was repeatedly indignant at the suggestion that he was a theist. So, was he a deist, like Voltaire and Diderot? Or a pantheist, like Spinoza, whose philosophy he admired: 'I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings'?

Let's remind ourselves of the terminology. A theist believes in a supernatural intelligence who, in addition to his main work of creating the universe in the first place, is still around to oversee and influence the subsequent fate of his initial creation. In many theistic belief systems, the deity is intimately involved in human affairs. He answers prayers; forgives or punishes sins; intervenes in the world by performing miracles; frets about good and bad deeds, and knows when we do them (or even think of doing them). A deist, too, believes in a supernatural intelligence, but one whose activities were confined to setting up the laws that govern the universe in the first place. The deist God never intervenes thereafter, and certainly has no specific interest in human affairs. Pantheists don't believe in a supernatural God at all, but use the word God as a nonsupernatural synonym for Nature, or for the Universe, or for the lawfulness that governs its workings. Deists differ from theists in that their God does not answer prayers, is not interested in sins or confessions, does not read our thoughts and does not intervene with capricious miracles. Deists differ from pantheists in that the deist God is some kind of cosmic intelligence, rather than the pantheist's metaphoric or poetic synonym for the laws of the universe. Pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism.

There is every reason to think that famous Einsteinisms like 'God is subtle but he is not malicious' or 'He does not play dice' or 'Did God have a choice in creating the Universe?' are pantheistic, not deistic, and certainly not theistic. 'God does not play dice' should be translated as 'Randomness does not lie at the heart of all things.' 'Did God have a choice in creating the Universe?' means 'Could the universe have begun in any other way?' Einstein was using 'God' in a purely metaphorical, poetic sense. So is Stephen Hawking, and so are most of those physicists who occasionally slip into the language of religious metaphor. Paul Davies's *The Mind of God* seems to hover somewhere between Einsteinian pantheism and an obscure form of deism - for which he was rewarded with the Templeton Prize (a very

large sum of money given annually by the Templeton Foundation, usually to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion). . . .